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## SYRIAC VERSIONS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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### I

ALL scholars who have perused the Syriac Version of the Old Testament have arrived at the conclusion that it is a direct translation from the Hebrew, though not always corresponding exactly with the Massoretic text of our day. One of the most obscure questions which attracts the mind of a Biblical scholar is the precise epoch of its appearance; but it is fairly certain that the translation of many Books of first necessity for daily worship saw the light before A.D. 200. It is, indeed, highly improbable that the strong Christian community of Syria and Mesopotamia, which was for the major part of Israelite extraction, could remain till that time without Psalter and Pentateuch. Moreover, since this community was sufficiently numerous at about A.D. 150, it is very unlikely that the above-mentioned Books were not already translated even before the middle of the second century. Merx<sup>1</sup> goes so far as to state that Bardesanes of Edessa knew the Pshiṭta of the Old Testament.

On the other hand, Hebrew having ceased to be the language of the majority of the Israelite nation, the common people could with difficulty understand the sacred style used in books read only by the authoritative caste of the

<sup>1</sup> *Bardesanes von Edessa*, Halle, 1863, p. 19.

Rabbis. For this reason, it is not safe to think that the Jewish community of Osrhoéne did not prove a very powerful factor in the production of this Version. We purposely use the word Osrhoéne because we firmly believe that the Pshiṭta has been elaborated in Western Mesopotamia, probably at Edessa. Its wording represents the Edessenian Aramaic language which, from the first half of the second century, became the sole sacred language in the Near East, from the Eastern Mediterranean shores as far as China, and from Taurus and the Caspian Sea to the Southern parts of the Arabian peninsula, and was used also in many parts of Egypt and Abyssinia. This Edessenian dialect influenced, for a long time, several of the most stubborn Jewish circles of Assyria and Babylonia. By personal knowledge I am aware that, in our own days, in many Israelite centres of great importance, like Zâkho, 50 miles NW. of Mosul (the ancient Nineveh), Shéranesh, 15 miles NE. of Zâkho, and Dehók, 35 miles N. of Mosul, this Mesopotamian Aramaic, mixed sometimes with the dialect of the Targūms, is spoken and used for daily transactions and daily worship. In my last travels in the East I visited four times these Israelite communities, and I took, on the spot, some linguistic notes that I hope some day to publish.

The Edessenian dialect differed in some points from the Aramaic used in Palestine and in Syria, at the beginning of the Christian era. The language of Palestine contained generally more Hebraic vocables and forms of verbs. The nouns of action, for instance, of the derived verbs ܦܥܠ and ܦܥܠܐ were formed by adding a Zkâpha to the second radical, as in Arabic; and the suffix-pronouns were all pronounced at the end of a verb or a noun, ex. gr. *kūmi*

(arise) fem. for *kūm* of the Mesopotamian dialect. This Arabo-Hebraic current in Aramaic was even found in particles and in substantives, for example, when the Mesopotamians pronounced ܐܠܬܐ *small* and ܐܠܐ *where*, the Palestinians read ܐܠܬܐ and ܐܠܐ. On orthographic grounds, the Palestinian Aramaic was marked by its preference for the graphic fusion of words. An instance of this phenomenon is found in the particle ܐܠܐ which is frequently joined with the following word by the complete rejection of its Nūn.

The Aramaic dialect of Mesopotamia was less influenced by the outside world, and became, through the impulsion of Christianity, starting at Edessa, the Syriac commonly so-called; but the Aramaic of Palestine has partly been Hellenized, as we find it, in later generations, in Palestinian Syriac, and has partly been Arabicized, and we encounter it to-day in such a form in the village of Ma'lūlah near Damascus, and has partly been Hebraized, when the Arameans began to fade away under a Western domination; the language having lost, for official business, the importance that it had for centuries before, its character of a mixed Arameo-Hebrew became more strongly accentuated, and for decades it was almost exactly the multicoloured dialect used in the Targūms.

We lay stress upon the above statements in order to make it clear that the Old Testament Pshitta is surely a Mesopotamian production, without any appreciable Hellenic savour. This assertion is rendered more plausible by the influence of the Targūms which is sometimes felt in a strange manner in many Books. This influence has been noticed by Perles in the Pentateuch,<sup>2</sup> by Cornill for

<sup>2</sup> *Meletemata Peschittoniana*, Breslau, 1859.

Ezechiél,<sup>3</sup> and by Siegmund for the book of Chronicles.<sup>4</sup> We cannot explain this influence of the Targūms without the previous help of some Judeo-Christians. The Targūms have never had any honour in the Eastern Christian circles, and no writer has ever mentioned their name. To think, therefore, that some Jewish Rabbis, new converts to Christianity, have taken an active share in the preparation of a Version which would tend to spread among Eastern nations the Torah and the Prophets is, as stated above, not in contradiction to the course of events. The Christian Church of that period was Judaic, and nothing is known of its being linked with Hellenic circles. It is only towards the end of the second century that a slight change was noticed. If we can credit the legendary book, *Doctrine of Addai*, with a certain historical value, this first step towards the 'Catholicity' of the Aramean Church with the Hellenized parts of Syria, would have taken place under Bishop Pālūt. We are informed that this bishop went to Antioch, and received his ordination from Serapion, bishop of this Metropolis. No other confirmation of this important event is known to exist in an historical book, but, however insufficient is its authority, we may accept it, in the absence of a better proof, as possible, inasmuch as no serious critic has so far positively contradicted it.

In spite of the great ascendancy of the Jewish colony, some Talmudic meanings of Hebrew words have not been given their right linguistic sense; for instance, Isa. 7. 14, the Hebrew word עלמה in the sentence הנה העלמה הרה וילדת בן is translated into Syriac by the word

<sup>3</sup> *Das Buch des Propheten Ezechiél*, Leipzig, 1886, 154-5.

<sup>4</sup> *Die syrische Uebersetzung zu den Büchern der Chronik*, in 'Jahrb. für prot. Theologie', 1879.

ܠܒܝܬܐ *virgin*, to make it conform to the Evangelical quotation (Matt. 1. 23), but it is clear that this Semitic term corresponding with the Arabic غلام and the Aramaic ܠܒܝܬܐ means simply in its masculine form a *young man* married or unmarried, and, in its feminine form, a *young woman* married or unmarried. Moreover, that this word is taken sometimes exclusively in the sense of a *married woman* is clear from the following sentence which does not suffer another interpretation (Prov. 30. 19) ‘*There are four things that I know not . . . and the way of a man with a married woman*’ ודרך גבר בעלמה. The four things are evidently cases of an action which leaves no obvious record behind it, the serpent on the rock, the ship in the sea, the bird in the air, and, by consequence, the woman alluded to is not a virgin.

At the beginning of the fourth century, when the union between the Aramean Church and the Graeco-Roman Christendom was cemented by the Christian attitude of Constantine, and some years later by the persecution of Eastern Christians which was believed to have been occasioned by Israelites who were at the time in favour with the Queen Ephra Hormiz,<sup>5</sup> an enterprise was unanimously undertaken to revise the Syriac Version and to make it more in harmony with the Septuagint which was the only Version in use among the utterly Hellenized population of the greater part of Syria and Palestine. We have already pointed to the possibility of the New Testament Pshiṭta having undergone at this period a similar revision according to the Greek text;<sup>6</sup> the way was opened and the Old Testament Version followed, at a short interval of time, its consort of the New Testament.

<sup>5</sup> *Talm. Ta'anit* 24 b.

<sup>6</sup> *Expository Times*, May, 1915.

This recension has not been carried out in the same way in all the sacred Books; the Psalter<sup>7</sup> and the prophetic Books have been, on account of their important rôle in the New Testament, more accurately collated with the Greek Version; Job and the Proverbs, on which the Targūms depend, have scarcely been touched; the same may be said, but in a lesser degree, of Genesis.

The Pshiṭta Version, as may easily be gathered from what has been written, is of paramount importance for the criticism of the Massoretic text, and its study cannot be too highly estimated in our dealings with Biblical questions. The following study claims to show, in a very succinct manner, and with a few illustrations, the merits and the defects of this Version, and may perhaps be considered, so far as we are aware, not the second one, in Scriptural investigations intended to make more fully understood the words and precepts of the Lord.

## II

We reduce the chief points of comparison of the Syriac translation with the original to five: (1) the case where the translation is wrong; (2) the case where it is too literal; (3) the case where a Rabbinical gloss is added to the original; (4) the case where it exhibits another text; (5) the case where it omits a word or two.

We will take as illustrations instances from the first thirteen chapters of the book of Genesis which have undergone little change in the Septuagint.

*Under the first case:*

(1) (1. 1). 'In the beginning Elohim created the heaven(s)

<sup>7</sup> Cf. F. Berg, *The influence of the Sept. upon the Pesh. Psalter*, New York, 1895.

and the earth.' The Hebrew objective particle **נָא** is rendered here only by the word 'essence', so that the sentence runs thus: 'the essence of the heaven and the essence of the earth'.

(2) (1. 29) 'And Elohim said, Behold I have given you every herb producing a seed which is upon the face of all the earth.' The words זרע זרע are translated by 'of the seed which is sown'.

(3) (2. 8) 'And Yahwéh Elohim planted a garden eastward.' The word מִקְדָּם is literally translated, here only, by מֵמֵתָּ which means 'from the beginning'.

(4) (9. 19) 'These three (were) the sons of Noah and of these all the earth was overspread.' The sentence *סבסב סבסב סבסב סבסב סבסב* is translated by : *סבסב סבסב סבסב* : 'and from these they spread over all the earth'.

(5) (13. 9) 'Is not all the earth before thy face?' The Massoretic interrogative particle הלא is superseded by הנה and rendered by 'behold'.

*Under the second case:*

(1) (2. 3) 'And Elohim blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because He rested in it from all His work which Elohim had created and made.'

The final words אשר ברא אלהים לעשות are rendered by the sentence : ܐܕܢܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ ܕܥܠܡܐ, 'that God created to do', which is a pure Hebraism having no clear meaning in Syriac.

(2) (2. 5) 'And there was not a man to till the ground.' The word האדם taken here in a general sense of 'man' is rendered by the proper name אדם.

(3) (2. 22) 'And the rib which Jahveh Elohim had taken from the man, builded he into a woman.' The Syriac construction of the sentence ending in ܐܠܠܐ is



a Hebraism giving no natural sense by the use of the Lâmed.

*Under the third case:*

(1) (4. 20) 'And 'Adah bare Iabal; he became the father of the dweller in tents, and (having) cattle.' Between the words וּמִקְנָה and וְאֵהָל the Syriac adds וּמִיֵּשְׁבֵי 'and those who possess'.

(2) (4. 25) 'And Adam knew his wife again.' The Syriac inserts the word 'Eve' before 'his wife'.

(3) (5. 5) The Syriac has, 'And all the days of the life ...', in inserting the words 'his life'.

(4) (12. 3) 'And I will bless them that bless thee, and him that despiseth thee will I curse, and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.' The Syriac adds the word וּבְנֵי after וְהָאָרֶץ so that the phrase becomes 'and in thee and in thy posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed'. These words may be considered as an interpolation by a Christian hand to make the promise more applicable to the Christ.

(5) (13. 18) 'And Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the terebinths of Mamré.' The Syriac inserts the relative adjective אֲמֹרִי 'Amorite' after the word Mamré.

*Under the fourth case:*

(1) (3. 16): 'Unto the woman He said: I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children, and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.' The Syriac has וְהָאִשָּׁה 'and thou shalt turn to (or against) thy husband'. The translation of the easy Massoretic particle אֶל by עַל which means more frequently 'against', and the change of the letter ק into a כ in the word תְּשׁוּקָתְךָ which in other places is rightly rendered by 'desire' would

point to a certain change in the sacred text which we have to-day. The LXX have also ἀποστροφή.

(2) (4. 8) 'And Cain said unto Abel his brother, and it happened that at their being in the field (while they were in the field), Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and killed him.' There is possibly something missing in the text, since we are not told what Cain said unto Abel. The Pshīṭta supplies this by the insertion of ܠܢ ܠܝܗܘܐ ܕܢܝܢܐ 'let us go to the field'.

(3) (6. 3) 'And Jahweh said: "My spirit will not rule in man for ever".' The Syriac has ܠܐ ܠܚܕܐ 'will not dwell', which suits the context better; and induces us to suppose that the original might have been ידון for ידן.

(4) (6. 9) 'These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man and blameless in his generations; Noah walked with God.' The Syriac has 'and Noah pleased God', a sense nearer to the Septuagint εὐηρέσθησεν δὲ Νῶε τῷ Θεῷ.

(5) (13. 12) 'Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelt in the towns of the Kikkar, and placed his tents as far as Sodom.' Instead of ܘܝܬܐܗܠ the Syriac has ܠܡܕܢܐ 'and inherited', with the change of ܗ into ܗ and of ܝܢ into ܝܢ, which the Hebrew letters easily bear.

*Under the fifth case:*

(9. 22) 'And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers without.' The word ܒܚܝܢ is utterly missing in Syriac.

The kind of study which we have made for only thirteen chapters of the book of Genesis, will suffice to give an adequate idea of the Syriac Version. The reader can safely draw the conclusion that all the books of the Old

Testament may be more or less submitted to this criticism with an absolutely identical result. It would therefore be useless to give our inquiry a wider scope; but we may remark that there are sometimes complete changes in proper names, and sometimes slight ones. So 8. 4, the word 'Ararat', in Assyrian 'Urartu', is rendered by the Parthian name 'Kardu', and 13. 10 the word Šo'ar is written Ša'an.

### III

While for the New Testament the Aramean and the Judeo-Christian populations of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine, used several Versions made directly from the Greek, they contented themselves, for the Old Testament, with the Pshiṭta. At a very late date, when the Christological movement strengthened the union between the Western Syrians and their Hellenic co-religionists reigning at Constantinople, a purely private enterprise to produce a text directly from the Greek took place about A.D. 500: the work of Philoxenus of Hierapolis, elaborated with the help of the Chorepiscopus Polycarpus;<sup>8</sup> and more than a hundred years later the Hexapla was translated from 615 to 617 by Paul, Bishop of Tella of Mauzela, which Western geographers called Constantina.

These two versions, though very important for the criticism of the text of the Septuagint, could never possess the slightest prestige in the Churches, and the Pshiṭta remained after, as it was before, the sole official version of Syriac-speaking communities. The two Hellenized versions were only known to a few scholars, who through them

<sup>8</sup> This date has been vindicated by us in a study which will soon appear in the *Expositor*.

vainly tried on some occasions to criticize the previous standard text. Even at as late a date as the thirteenth century the well-known Bar Hebraeus opened a campaign against the Pshiṭta in favour of the Hexapla. A special chapter is devoted in his Syriac Grammar entitled 'The Rays' to prove its superiority to the Pshiṭta;<sup>9</sup> but such isolated cavils remained ineffectual, and the love of ecclesiastical circles for the first version was so accentuated, that MSS. of the two Hellenized secondary versions have been doomed to scarcity at all periods, and in our days the Philoxenian is known only by scanty fragments, and the Hexapla is preserved in an incomplete form in a few European libraries, and in some old monasteries of the East.

The Old Testament Syriac is, therefore, one, and as it has not undergone any substantial change from the date to which the oldest manuscripts belong, we can hardly find in its text any important variant. The quotations also of the Syrian Fathers, who undoubtedly use the Pshiṭta alone, with only the addition or omission of a particle or a trifling word, pointing to the fact that they were quoting from memory, corroborate the point of a single Version.

There are, however, in the possession of Dr. Agnes S. Lewis a few palimpsest leaves, which, by exhibiting a text somewhat different from the established Version, afford a number of perplexities to critics. We mean the text published by her in No. XI of the series entitled *Studia Sinaitica*. The best way to give an idea of this curious text is to print some of its phrases side by side with the standard text of the Pshiṭta.

<sup>9</sup> In P. Martin's *Œuvres grammaticales d'Abou'l Faradj dit Bar Hebraeus*, 1872, vol. I, p. 240.

PSHITTA.

لَا' Ps. 104. 2 (same meaning).

Job 9. 6 (same meaning).

𐤒𐤓𐤕 𐤁𐤓 𐤏𐤁𐤓 Job 26. 6  
(same meaning).

۱۱۱۱ *ibid.* (same meaning).

ᐃᐃᐃᐃ ᐃᐃ Job 38. 11 Do not go  
increasing in.

۱۲ *ibid.* ۱۲ in his hand-  
ful.

محدا Isa. 60. 6 Sheba.

Excd. 14. 25 and  
linked.

﴿حجۃ﴾ Isa. 60. 7 they will  
gather.

الحبب Isa. 34. 12 (same meaning).

Isa. 31. 9 from  
before the sign.

Isa. 34. 7 will be in-  
toxicated.

Amos 5. 8 **حالا اُفتنه**  
over the surface of the  
earth.

Ps. 104. 3 in the  
water.

وَأَسْأَلُكُمْ جُوبَ ٩. ٦ أَتَسْكُنُونَ  
 inhabitants.

الحمد Ps. 134. 7 (same meaning).

These are only the most striking variants that the MS. offers when compared with the Pshiṭṭa. For quotations from the Psalms and from Job we have not included such variant readings as may be due to too much freedom on the part of the unknown author; but to believe that this author, who, at any rate, seems to have been a serious writer, would have been so eccentric as purposely to change many words of the sacred text when quoting them, is a most improbable hypothesis. We cannot find in Syriac literature any one so fanciful; and the question ought therefore to be approached from a different point of view.

We have seen that the Syriac Churches of a later date possessed, besides the Pshiṭṭa, the Philoxenian and the Hexapla versions. Can then these few verses printed by Mrs. Lewis be drawn from one of these two versions? A negative answer is the only one possible, because the text is evidently a direct translation from the Hebrew, and no Syriac writer of importance has ever used these versions. Moreover, Mrs. Lewis's MS. is certainly very ancient, and if it may be assigned to a date later than the time of Philoxenus, it has doubtless preceded by many years the epoch of Paul of Tella.

We are, therefore, face to face with a text which cannot be easily identified. History tells us, too, that the famous Maraba, Nestorian Patriarch of Seleucia (540–551)<sup>10</sup> translated the Old Testament from Greek into Syriac; but besides the improbability of the historical information, our manuscript is of Jacobite origin, and cannot contain a version produced by one of the greatest enemies of

<sup>10</sup> See Ebedjesu's Catalogue in Assemani, *Biblioth. Orient.* III, 1, p. 75; and Amr, in Gismondi's *Maris, Amri et Slibae Commentaria, pars altera*, p. 41.

Monophysitism. Can we then suppose that these short quotations are derived from an early Syriac version now lost, but used by writers whose works have not come down to us? The question is too complicated to be answered either affirmatively or negatively in a categorical manner.

Mrs. Lewis wishes me to record the fact that these fragments of the Syriac Old Testament Pshiṭta occur in the under-script of the palimpsest described by her in No. XI *Studia Sinaitica*, after the whole text of the *Protevangeliū Jacobi* and the *Transitus Mariae* in Syriac, and forty-five leaves of some ancient Qurâns, containing variants; all made use of simply as writing material by the tenth-century scribe of the upper-script; which is a homogeneous collection of extracts from early Christian writers, Greek and Syriac, rendered into Arabic.

These facts are a complete refutation of the wild theory recently advanced by a French scholar, M. Leon, that the old Qurân leaves are a forgery. The manuscript was bought for the sake of the *Protevangeliū* and the *Transitus* only; and therefore the supposed forger, *mirabile dictu*, must have received no remuneration for his almost superhuman pains. Moreover, these texts from the O. T. Pshiṭta and the Qurân have waited ten or even eighteen years for their full decipherment, since they were bought by their present owner in 1895.